The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

MARILYN MEYERS

Interviewed by: Thomas Dunnigan

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Q: Suppose we begin by you telling us about your education and what interested you in the Foreign Service.

MEYERS: Thanks, Tom, I'll be glad to. I was one of two daughters in a family of four. I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee. I went to both elementary and high school in Memphis, graduated from high school there. I went on to earn my college degree at what was then called Southwestern at Memphis, a Presbyterian-affiliated small liberal arts college which has since changed its name to Rhodes College. I received my BA with honors in international studies. I graduated in 1964 and then went on to graduate school. I wanted to continue to study international affairs, politics, foreign relations. That interest made me want to come to Washington to do graduate work. So I thought well, I will go to whichever graduate school, be it Georgetown School of Foreign Service or Johns Hopkins SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies) offers me the bigger scholarship. As it turns out, I was awarded a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship so I had to make the decision where to go and I choose SAIS. Theirs was a two-year program, Masters in International Studies. I spent the first year here in Washington and the second year at the Bologna Center in Bologna, Italy. So that's my education, bachelor's degree and the masters.

In terms of what interested me in the Foreign Service, to begin with I think, two things. First, I've always been more oriented towards the social sciences. When I was in high school, it was history, language, be it Spanish or French, English that I preferred over hard sciences and math. I remember also that I came to New Jersey when I was only about 14 years olmy first plane flight! - I came up to spend the summer with my aunt, uncle, and three cousins. They lived right outside New York City in northern New Jersey. We went, of course, into the city to see everything including the United Nations. I remember just being fascinated, particularly by the interpreters and even the guides that showed us around. So that was my first early experience. But what really got me interested in the idea of living abroad as opposed to just traveling abroad occurred when I was at Southwestern. The college offered a junior year abroad program; I went and spent my junior year in France, lived with a French family. It was the French experience that fostered a deep interest. And within three yearin 1965 - I was able to follow that up with a second year abroad, in Bologna as part of the SAIS program. So those were the things that brought me to the Foreign Service - the personal experiences of living abroad and my the interest in politics and international trade and so on.

Q: When did you decide to take the examination?

MEYERS: I found out there was a Foreign Service - I hadn't even heard of it, my father was in business - when I was at Southwestern. My American history professor told me about it. I took the written exam in my senior year. I passed it and went on to the oral in Washington the first fall at SAIS. I did not pass, which was not a great tragedy since fortunately, I was in graduate school. But, as you know, if you flunk anywhere along the way, you have to start the whole process over. So when I was in Italy, the second year of the masters' program, spring of 1966, I retook the written exam at the Consulate General in Florence, not far from Bologna. I again passed it and took the oral the summer of '66 after I returned to Washington. I passed the oral the second time.

Q: Congratulations! I note from your bio that you spent some time at the Department of Agriculture. How did that work out?

MEYERS: That worked out very well. As I just said, I passed the oral in the summer of 1966 and was all ready to start work and the Foreign Service panel said "Oh, but wait there're a few other steps. First, you have to undergo a background investigation. You've lived in Europe twice, you've traveled to the Soviet Union, behind the Iron Curtain to Moscow and so on. That investigation will take awhile. And then there's a required medical exam, which shouldn't be a problem at your age. Finally there's a question of budget, whether we'll actually be hiring you at all."

So then I said "What do I do in the meantime?" And they said "You go out and get a job."

Fortunately, I had alternative interviews lined up, including one at Agriculture. So I kept my appointment with this wonderful person, my real first boss, whose name was Jim Howard. He knew my situation, that I was taking the Foreign Service oral and that I had taken it the day before. And he said "How did it go?" I said "I passed." And he said "why are you sitting here?" I said "I need a job" and I explained that it would be at least a year before State could, maybe, take me on. He explained what I would do for the Foreign Marketing Service, in his office. We had this discussion that, if I would agree to stay with him for a year, I could have the job. During that year he would try to convince me to stay on and become, perhaps, an officer in the Foreign Agricultural Service, Agriculture's own "Foreign Service". So that's how I ended up at Agriculture. He was wonderful and he understood why I chose to move othe challenge of greater growth. So I did move, in the fall of '67 over to State. He and his wife even invited me and my parents out to his home in Virginia for a celebratory drink when they came to Washington for my swearing in at State.

Q: Let me ask a rather indelicate question. Did you feel any sense of discrimination, as a woman, in government service, either at Agriculture or State, back in the Sixties?

MEYERS: Only from my first oral panethree white mein the fall of 1964. They assumed I would be in for a "short ride" until the best marriage offer came along. Other than that, I had very good bosses. Most of them were men; I had only one woman boss - there weren't many women officers in the Service those days.

Q: Well, then you were called to enter the Foreign Service, in I believe October 1967, and you entered with a large class of people, the A-100 class. How did you find that? Helpful or not?

MEYERS: You mean the class? Well, I enjoyed meeting my various colleagues from different parts of the country and varying backgrounds. I think all in all it was very good preparation and quite necessary for what we were about to do.

Q: Then you got your first assignment, which I had something to do with. You went to Sydney, Australia. Was that a surprise?

MEYERS: That was a surprise, because frankly I was hoping for a posting to Europe. I'd studied in Europe twice, lived there two years. I knew I liked it. I was willing to serve anywhere from Helsinki south to the Mediterranean. I thought my French - I entered with fluent French, rated three, three plus I believe, would help in that regard. So when I got Sydney, I was surprised. The assignments were very dramatically done. All of us junior officers were seated in the FSI (Foreign Service Institute) auditorium. Then our administrators called us up one by one, to get our certificates. As you walked up they said "And congratulations, you're going to X or Y." One woman, I believe she was a USIS officer, was told "You're going to Lahore!", which, of course, is in Pakistan. And she had never heard of this place, so as she walked back to her seat she very carefully studied the regional maps on the wall, drawing chuckles from the crowd. When they said Sydney, I did know where it was, but it was a surprise.

Q: What was your job in Sydney?

MEYERS: No surprise, I was assigned to the consular section. I think almost all first tour officers, at least then and I think still now, pull consular assignments as their first duty. It was quite a small section. There was a senior consular officer and two junior vice consuls, and I was one of the two. We handled, the three of us, all consular work - American citizens services work - as well as visas.

Q: Was there any sense of rotation at the Consulate General, where junior officers were moved from one section, consular or administrative?

MEYERS: No, not in our Consulate General. The only thing we did was to switch between non-immigrant and immigrant visas. The senior consular officer handled ACS (American Citizen Services) and the two junior consular officers rotated between immigrant and non-immigrant visas.

Q: What were your problems?

MEYERS: Few really. I think the biggest problem I had personally was my supervisor, the senior consular officer, not the first but the second one. As you probably know from your own experience, consular work never stops; it can be 24/7. And unfortunately, that's the way this woman dealt with it. She was obsessed with work and gave it her all. My problem came when I wanted to take three weeks off in summer 1969 to fly home to be in my sister's wedding. My leave was refused. I cut the request to two weeks but it still was no go. To be fair to her, there had been a significant change in the immigrant visa law so we were trying to process a lot of immigrant visas before the new regulations became effective the end of June. But I still maintain that the job could have been done and handled and I regret deeply that I wasn't in my sister's wedding. I appealed to the Consul General. He was about to okay my leave when my boss collapsed in a flood of tears in his office and he backed down. I was a junior officer. I was very inexperienced and respectful. I think a few years further along I would have said "Well, tough luck, I'm out of here; I will be back and I trust you can manage without little me in the meantime." I didn't do it then; I didn't have guts enough. That was the biggest problem I encountered. But you see how vividly I remember it even now.

Q: I understand perfectly. Did the Ambassador visit the post often or not?

MEYERS: No. He came down a few times. Again, there was a change in ambassadors during the two years I was there. There's something nice I recall. There was a political officer in Embassy Canberra, who handled labor affairs, John Dorrance. He sensed somehow that I was eager to do more. When occasionally he came to have lunch with a labor leader or someone based in Sydney, he would usually call up to see if I wanted to join them if I could get away. Maybe this just happened two or three times in the two years. But it was a great brightener for me.

Q: Did you get to go up to the Embassy often?

MEYERS: No, consular work was a full-time job and it was concentrated in Sydney. Of course, as a junior officer, you are so very dependent on your national staff, because they know the rules and regulations and all the ins and outs. Our senior consular clerk was terrific. We had some tough times in immigration. The Vietnam War was still going full bore and a large R&R program had been set up to bring young Americans to Sydney for five days R&R. A full 747 flew in three to four times a week. The Australians were terrific hosts, inviting these young men to everything from sailing on Sydney harbor to weekend stays on sheep stations, etc. It was wonderful. Australia became the most popular R&R destination after Hawaii. These visits also quickly generated , no surprise, romances. And after four short days together, many a young couple turned up on our doorstep wanting to get married or to go to the States to get married.. And back then the fiancï¿½e visa didn't exist. So we had several young couples who were sorely disappointed. And Joan, our senior consular clerk, would try to explain the regulations at the visa counter and then would come back to me and say "Miss Meyers, that American chap doesn't want to hear it from me. I'm female. I'm Australian. He wants to hear it from an officer. So you're going to have to speak with him." And I'd say "Okay now, what is it I need to say?" And she would brief me very quickly on the points I had to make and then out I would go. Usually, the face fell as I approached (another woman!!) but at least I was an officer and I was an American; he didn't have to deal with an Australian. So that was a tough situatiofor them, for us. And we got a fair share of irate calls from distressed Aussie fathers and annoyed Parliamentarians. Then, eventually, a fiancï¿½e visa was created about the time we left Vietnam.

Q: Did we have bases in Australia at all, or did we have any troops there?

MEYERS: No, we did not have any military bases or troops stationed there.

Q: We had a space station, I believe, but that was far out in the country.

MEYERS: Yes, a monitoring station for NASA. When I was there the first landing on the moon, Apollo 11, took place. The Australians were every bit as proud and happy and excited as we were. It was wonderful watching the landing on that tiny grainy black and white TV screen.

Q: At the Consulate General were there other agencies represented, besides State?

MEYERS: At that time, no. We had a Commercial Section but it was all State because the separate Foreign Commercial Service of the Commerce Department came later. We had the U.S. Information Service (USIS) and U.S. Travel Service, part of Commerce, in separate locations.

Q: Did you get to travel around the country at all, see much of Australia?

MEYERS: Not much. Any traveling I did was on my own ticket. I did get to the Outback on vacation. A friend from California came for a few weeks. We flew to Adelaide and then rode a bus north to Ayers Rock and Alice Springs. We stopped overnight in Coober Pedy where white opals are mined. The trip to Ayers Rock took almost a weemainly over unpaved roads. I also went down to Tasmania. I met a couple of women when we were on the trip up to Ayers Rock who were from Launceston in Tasmania. So I went down and spent a couple of days with them. Tasmania is the smallest of the states. Sometimes you even find maps or drawings of Australia where Tasmania has been left off completely. Of course, the 400,000 people who come from Tasmania are quite upset by that!

Q: How about speechmaking? Any of that?

MEYERS: I can't recall actually doing any. I was in the Junior Australian-American Association, which is how I made some of my Aussie friends. But I don't recall any speechmaking.

Q: Well, in 1969, of course, President Johnson was replaced by President Nixon. Did that have much effect in Australia or not?

MEYERS: I would say no. The war in Vietnam was grinding on and the Australians were in there with us. They had made the decision to go in and stay, which of course we appreciated very much. But I don't think moving from one administration to another really had much effect on our relations.

Q: How about demonstrations against the Consulate General?

MEYERS: There may have been one or two, but fairly small. Nothing that stands out.

Q: Well, at the end of your first tour in Australia, you came back to Washington, I believe to take the Economic Course. Was that something you requested or were you picked for that?

MEYERS: I don't quite recall. I think I was just assigned, which was fine. I wanted to come back to Washington. My father was quite ill and I wanted to be in the States. I felt the econ course would add a lot to my knowledge and round me out in needed ways.

Q: What did you think of the course? Was it worthwhile in your later work or not?

MEYERS: I'd say yes. I think it's always important, even if you're not dealing directly with macro policy and micro policy and statistics to have a good grounding in econ which is helpful if you will be dealing with trade issues and the like. So, yes, I think it was worthwhile and was helpful.

Q: That was followed in 1970 by your assignment to the Bureau of African Affairs, North Africa (AF/N), I believe, as an economic officer, which was suitable. Had you asked for that or was this just an assignment that came to you?

MEYERS: That was an assignment that came to me. The African bureau was divided into regional or country groupings and each had an economic officer responsible for the economic/trade issues of that whole office. The "country" or "desk" officers focused on political and political- military issues etc. But the separation out of econ made little sense. There is no way, for example, that you could be "country" officer for Libya and not deal with the oil issue. When I came aboard in June 1970, we were being forced out of Wheelus Air Force Base. King Idris had just been overthrown the previous September by Qadhafi, who is still there. To take oil out of this bigger picture is really nonsense. Obviously, oil, oil exports, the ramifications of nationalization of U.S. companies assets, etc., would be an integral part of the Libyan country officer's job. So at best I was sort of a backup, trailing after more experienced, highly motivated officers.

Q: How far did your mandate extend? It didn't include Egypt, did it?

MEYERS: No. Egypt belonged to the Near East Asia Bureau (NEA). The office of North African Affairs ran from Libya west to Mauritania. It also included Sudan. I did the regional econ work for about a year. My boss was very perceptive and good with his officers. He saw that I was at loose ends, not really fully occupied. We had a two month gap on the Tunisia desk and he asked me to cover it. And than a longer opportunity - to cover the Mauritania/Sudan desk - arose. So I became the Mauritania-Sudan desk officer for almost a year. So I got my "desk". Perhaps it wasn't as important as Libya, Algeria or Morocco but it was mine and a big step up for me.

Q: Did you get to travel to the area?

MEYERS: Yes, I did. In February 1972 I made an orientation trip to both Mauritania and Sudan. I remember saying to Jim Blake, my boss, "You know, I'll be rotating out of this job this summer. Obviously I'd love to go because I'll learn a great deal and still have four or five months to go but I don't know if we can justify the trip." And he said "Yes, you should go." And I did and I saw and learned a lot.

Q: Very good! Were we encouraging economic integration among the North African countries in those days? Europe was beginning to coalesce. Did we want to see the Arabs in North Africa do that?

MEYERS: I don't believe so. Certainly nothing was going on in AF/N. We were fully occupied just handling the events of each dacrises and protocol such as a visit by the Sudanese Foreign Minister. We had no formal diplomatic relations with Sudan as they had been broken off after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. However, we were attempting to get relations on a better track and trying to make an appointment for the Sudanese foreign minister with Secretary of State Rogers. Well, the Sudanese foreign minister didn't want to see Mr. Rogers. No, he wanted to see Henry Kissinger in the White House. And I remember turning to somebody and asking, "Who is this Henry Kissinger in the White House?" The minister did get to see Mr. Rogers but I don't believe he got over to the White House to see Mr. Kissinger.

Q: Did senior officials in the Department and in the White House take much of an interest in North African affairs in those days?

MEYERS: Yes, they did. One of the senior Department officials interested was Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, David Newsom. David Newsom, before his recent return to Washington, had been Ambassador to Libya. He later moved upstairs to be Undersecretary for Political Affairs. And Libya had oil and Algeria, gas, and these assets were being nationalized by radical governments. And besides these countries, we still worked closely with conservative regimeTunisia under Bourguiba and Morocco under King Hassan II. Yes, we had the attention of State's seventh floor and some in the White House.

Q: Did we have much to do with the UN Economic Commission for Africa?

MEYERS: Not that I can recall. I certainly didn't. It doesn't come to mind.

Q: Any congressional visits that sparked interest?

MEYERS: I don't believe so, no. But there was a memorable visit to this country I handled. You'll recall I covered the Tunisia desk for a few months. Right over the Christmas/New Year holiday period, 1970-1971, Tunisian President Bourguiba, became critically ill and it was decided to medevac him by U.S. military aircraft to the United States, to Walter Reed Hospital for evaluation and possible treatment. And so, as desk officer, I coordinated that effort which was amazing. I contacted and dealt with offices and people I never knew existed. To Jim Blake's credit, he left me in charge providing guidance as needed. Once the flight arrived here it was to land at Andrews Air Force Base just outside Washington. But at the last minute the landing was shifted to Dulles. Something about the wind direction. So we had to redirect the whole welcoming entourage, including the Tunisian ambassador, Assistant Secretary Newsom, the Secret Service, etc., to Dulles. And then there was the helicopter. Bourguiba was to be ferried from Dulles to Walter Reed by helicopter. But they were late and it was now dark. Did the landing pad at Walter Reed have sufficient lighting for a safe landing, etc., etc.? In the end, it all worked and I went home much relieved. And then the phone rang. It was the head of the security detail assigned to cover Bourguiba. And he said "Marilyn" - I think his name was Bob Lemon, I still remember his name - "I'm calling to let you know he just left." And I said "What?" "Yes, Bourguiba's just left the hospital." And I said "Really!? Was he supposed to do that? Where did he go?" And he said, "I don't know, I've got this address." And he read me this address and I said "That's the Ambassador's residence." Apparently President Bourguiba felt pretty good and decided, after two hours in the hospital, to "bag it," got dressed and went to the ambassador's. So Bob said, "I'm hanging up and moving my guys down there right now." It was a bitterly cold January nighl forgot to mention the snowstorm of a few days before! and the Secret Service detail was stuck in the driveway, protecting the residence. I immediately called my boss and he informed Mr. Newsom. The two decided just to leave him at the Ambassador's for the night and try to talk him into going back to the hospital the next day, which is what happened.. I think actually the Tunisian ambassador invited them (the security detail) into the house to get warm. And when the midnight shift arrived, he wouldn't let those inside leave. He gave them pajamas and toothbrushes so a couple of them ended up spending the night in the residence while the midnight shift paced the driveway in the frigid cold!

Q: I was going to ask you what problems you had in that assignment but I think this was probably one of them.

MEYERS: Yes, but it worked out fine in the end. Bourguiba was here for a couple of weeks; basically his problem was one of aging and increasing senility and so on. And then he went home. I think he lived several more years.

Q: Did you get mixed up in the oil from Libya question or not?

MEYERS: I didn't. That was something that was so hot that the political cone Libya desk officer took it over. The incumbent, Warren Clark, tried to include me as much as he could. I remember one afternoon going with Warren to Undersecretary U. Alexis Johnson's office. Warren had a decision memo that Johnson needed to clear. And again, it must have been winter, because it was already dark. I stood at the desk. Secretary Johnson had the desk lamp on and his cigarette smoke curled up toward the light. And I just had this visual of this white haired man reading this paper. And I remember just standing there thinking, "You're standing on the edge of history."

Q: A paper you had drafted?

MEYERS: A couple of sentences, at least; a comma there or a crossed "t" there or something, part of it, not that much though.

Q: Well, at the end of several years there, you were transferred to the other end of Africa, to Johannesburg, where you were economic and commercial officer. Was this something you looked forward to or requested?

MEYERS: Yes, I did request it. One of the things that happened during the two years that I was in AF/N was a switch in my career "cone" from political to economic. Back in the early 70s - I don't know what the setup is now - they had what was called a "Junior Threshold." In order to get promoted from FSO-6 to FSO-5, you had to go through another review. My career counselor was telling me that the political cone was so crowded that it really would be a good idea to switch to the econ cone because chances were I just might not make it to FSO-5. I talked to my bosses and, in particular, Jim Blake about it. And he said "Look, as you can see from AF/N, econ is where a lot of the action is. You can't separate these countries from their economic and trade interests." So I went ahead and I switched. There were some interesting econ positions open. One that was also a possibility was Tunis, but that didn't work out. And Johannesburg sounded fine, so I was okay with going there.

Q: Who was the Consul General there?

MEYERS: When I first got there it was Larue Lutkins, Larry Lutkins. Then he and his wife left and John Foley, John and Barbara Foley, came.

Q: How large was the post?

MEYERS: Well, it was not huge. We had two American consular officers, one quite senior, with several South African staff, several meaning three-four. Then there were two officers in the econ/commercial section. I was the junior of the two Americans and we had a couple of local employees in econ as well. There was a labor officer who was based in Jo'burg. And then there was the Consul General. There was also a USIS office in a separate location with two officers. So it was about the same size as the Sydney Consulate General.

Q: And the political work was done in Pretoria, I believe.

MEYERS: The political work was done in Pretoria and in Cape Town. The political section of the embassy moved there when the South African parliament went into session. And much of the economic work was, too. We had more of a commercial focus in Jo'burg.

Q: Did the apartheid make the work there difficult?

MEYERS: Apartheid did not make the work per se difficult. But apartheid made living and tolerating the situation in South Africa, as a human being, difficult. You always had to swallow hard and look the other way when you saw the inequities the blacks suffered. In terms of work, what made the work difficult were the policies that we adopted to show our disapproval. We decided not to promote tradshows, missions, anything - with South Africa. If an American businessman happened to stumble in and wanted help in marketing, we would, of course, take care of him. But there were no trade shows. Nothing like that. If an American company wanted an agent to sell their goods, we would try to find one. This was a request that came from the Commerce Department. But our posture was passive rather than active.

Q: Was this at the time when American companies were beginning to withdraw their investments in South Africa?

MEYERS: Not yet. The pressure wasn't on yet. The Sullivan principles hadn't been devised. That was still in the future. But, we had very little to do. We had a lot of time on our hands; my boss, who had just come from South Vietnam where things were always popping, was particularly frustrated.

Q: Were there any black Americans on the staff?

MEYERS: While I was there we sent out our first black officer. A man named Jim Baker was assigned to Pretoria as an economic officer.

Q: Did he get down to Jo'burg very often?

MEYERS: Once in a while he would come down. We would get together in the office; sometimes we would go out to lunch. If we were going to lunch, we had to go to a five star hotel. And we had to telephone ahead that a black was coming - his name was Jim Baker, that he was a first secretary in the American Embassy in Pretoria and was visiting Johannesburg for the afternoon on business and he would be coming with a fellow officer so there would be two. We'd just say a "fellow officer" and when I, a white female, walked in with him, you should have seen the expressions.

One of the greatest experiences I had in South Africa, I think in my whole Foreign Service career, was the time Jim and I and a friend were able to visit a gold mine owned by Gold Fields, South Africa. We drove out to the Reef and went all the way down to the bottom of the shafsome 5,000 feet dowto the working level of the mine. African miners, ore, trainlots of activity. We then had lunch at the mine manager's home, all of us. Then we watched the refining of the gold bars. Just the first smelting but the bars produced were some 90 percent plus gold and very heavy. I tried to pick one up but I couldn't get very far! We also saw the housing where the miners lived - blacks coming in from other countries and the black homelands, so called, within South Africa. They were living in squalid, crowded conditions, dormitories, etc. All in all it was quite a memorable day.

Q: There was no officer from Commerce on your staff, was there, did you have to do all the commercial work yourself?

MEYERS: No, we did it and we were both from State. Again, we're just talking '72 to '74 here.

Q: How about the relations with the Embassy. Were they cordial, workmanlike?

MEYERS: I think they were cordial. Most contact was between the CG (Consul General) and the Embassy. My boss had more contact with the economic counselor than I did. There was not a lot of back and forth. They were doing their work and analysis and we were doing ours.

Q: Were you called on to make speeches?

MEYERS: Not there. I participated in a few events. The officers that really had the challenging and exciting work were the USIS officers, because they were mandated to reach out to the minorities, well, majorities shall we say: the blacks, the Indians, the coloreds, those who were excluded from white, "proper" South African society. I do remember going along to some of their programs and events - out to the sprawling black township, Soweto, one night and getting stopped by the South African police when they saw three white faces in a car, a couple of which were women. "Excuse me, but what are you doing out here?" When we explained, well, it was "okay," begrudgingly okay. There was a control system - when we were going to go out to a black township, the Consulate or USIS had to notify the local government office in Jo'burg ahead as we were supposed to get "permission" to go. So we played the game of putting in an application saying we were going and we would never go pick up the permission to go. Because we felt we shouldn't have to ask in the first place. That kind of stuff.

Q: When you left Johannesburg, did you have a feeling that the apartheid system was on its way out?

MEYERS: I thought it would last a long time. I felt that the police and the system were still very much in control. As it was it lasted another twenty years or so.

Q: Did you notice any personal hostility to you as an American there?

MEYERS: At that point, not yet. We had not really started to push and attack the system yet.

Q: Well, following your interesting assignment in South Africa, you were selected to take a course in Japanese. Which you'd asked for?

MEYERS: I had. During a vacation break, while in South Africa, I took a trip to the Far East over Christmas and New Year's vacation. One of the officers in Johannesburg and his wife had previously served in Hong Kong and Jim told me how quickly the Far East, at least in appearance, was changing, becoming modernized, more westernized. So I decided to go have a look and one of the places I went was Japan. And I was absolutely struck, captured by Japan in two ways. First of all, I had never been in a culture that seemed so different. I'm talking about the arts - kabuki, and music and flower arranging- and dress - the kimonos. And at the same time, here was the city of Tokyo very much a part of the modern world. And all these businessmen racing back and forth, in their black suits and white shirts, no pastels yet. And I thought, "These guys are going to give us a run for our money when it comes to trade and commerce." And I also thought, "I want to be part of that." I came back to Johannesburg and on my desk was a circular asking for volunteers for hard language training, beginning in the summer of '74. One of the languages offered was Japanese. Others were Urdu, Chinese, and Farsi. I thought Farsi might be interesting, although I'd never been to Iran. I talked to our new CG, John Foley. And I said, "I want to volunteer for hard language training; I have the aptitude for it. And I'm vacillating between Farsi and Japanese." I gave him my reasoning, my thoughts on Japan. And he felt Japan was the smarter choice. So I volunteered for Japanese. In light of subsequent events in Iran, I'm certainly glad I did!

Q: What was that course intended to do? To help you speak the language, or to read it, or even to write it. Or to get you over the 2,2 hurdle?

MEYERS: To get you over the 2,2 hurdle. Basically what that meant was speaking at the 2 level, which is a basic speaking capability, and a rather elementary reading ability. I got the 2,2 after the year. Originally, my onward assignment was Fukuoka in Kyushu. But that got changed because somebody was leaving early. So I went to Tokyo, instead, after the one year. I was glad, because I hadn't had the chance to work in an embassy, only consulates. The downside of going to Tokyo language-wise is you're going to be dealing primarily with Japanese bureaucrats - in the Foreign Ministry and the then Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), and, in my case, Transportation. And most of the guys I dealt with had studied English for years. So, I'd go make my calls and of course we would converse in English because they knew what they were talking about and I would have been sitting there with my Japanese dictionary. So I went to Tokyo for three years, actually, from the summer of '75.

Q: Where you specialized in transportation problems. That includes, I presume, the automobile problem.

MEYERS: Yes, I had the transportation portfolio. At first I thought, "Ah, the Embassy's motor pool; I'll have control of the motor pool. That's going to be real power!" Of course, really, I dealt with trade issues in the transportation field. Yes, it had to do with the beginning of the automobile trade problems between the U.S. and Japan. Too many of their cars coming here; none of our cars going there, for which there were very good reasons. For one thing, U.S. vehicles were huge. And we made only left hand drive, whereas in Japan, you drive on the left. But, also, very importantly, the major part of my time was devoted to airline negotiations and which carriers got to fly where. The only international carrier for Japan then was Japan Air Lines (JAL). In those days, we had three carriers flying to Japan - Northwest and Pan American and Flying Tigers which was only cargo. All went to Japan and beyond. The Japanese wanted to update our aviation agreement, which dated back to the mid-Fifties. They felt it was very unequal in that Japan wasn't being given enough landing points for JAL here.. So there was a lot of friction on that. And I found the airline portfolio absolutely fascinating. And then also there were maritime issues on occasion.

Q: Were we still encouraging Japanese auto exports to the States or had we stopped that?

MEYERS: Aside from our free trade principles, I don't think you could say that we ever "encouraged" Japanese exports to the States. I mean, the Japanese were very, very adept at studying markets and making products consumers want. The U.S. had been through its first "oil shock" in the early Seventies. I got to Japan in '75. The American consumer by then was interested in buying cars that were fuel efficient and smaller. And the Japanese were making those cars, and they found a tremendous reception here. So the cars were promoting themselves.

Q: Were you there for the Lockheed scandal?

MEYERS: No, I arrived after that. The scandal was '73-'74. Our ambassador to Japan when I arrived in 1975 was James Hodgson, a former Lockheed official. He was the last Nixon-appointed ambassador. No scandal ever touched him and he remained as ambassador through the Ford Administration.

Q: What about the Japanese growing trade surplus with the U.S. Was that much of a problem to us at the time?

MEYERS: The number itself was not a problem. What caused the problem was the perception that Japanese saw trade as a one-way street. In other words, trade meant they could export but, so far as importing, they were not interested in importing manufactured goods but only raw materials since Japan is a natural resource poor country. When it comes to iron ore or natural gas or oil, they're all ready to bring it in and it was the finished goods they would send out. Pressure against Japan began to build, particularly as the Congress here began to see the impact of Japanese exports on various sectors - automobiles, color televisions, steeand on American jobs. And the perception that the U.S. manufacturer was not able to penetrate the Japanese market, that trade was not a two-way street, caused the problem, rather than the numbers.

Q: Were you there when Vice President Mondale came over on his visit? Was he concerned with these problems?

MEYERS: I think he was. I did not accompany him on his calls. I was only a First Secretary. But I was there in the control room, saw his comings and goings from the hotel. He was very gracious and also obviously a politician. He arrived late one night, having flown directly from Brussels. President Carter had dispatched him shortly after the inauguration to reassure major allies there would be no significant shift in U.S. policies. And he came to the hotel. And we were all standing in the doorways of our rooms to greet the vice President as he came down the hall. He must have been tired as all get out. But he stopped and greeted everyone. I said "hello" and that my family was from Minnesota. And the next morning, as he left, I was back on duty. So I went to the doorway to meet him again and he looked at me and said "I met you last night." And I was impressed that he remembered my face.

Q: Did you have any other problems we should talk about there?

MEYERS: I don't think so. It was an interesting tour. I was actually supposed to be there two years and I extended to three.

Q: You were brought back to the Japanese desk.

MEYERS: Oh, yes. Which I asked for.

Q: And there you were again doing economic work. How many of you were handling economics?

MEYERS: There were two of us. Two out of six officers.

Q: What problems were you faced with there?

MEYERS: One of the major things that I was working on was energy, a continuing problem. We'd been through a second oil crisis by the late Seventies. We were trying to work with the Japanese to develop and fund research on alternative sources of energy. And there was a sense that the Japanese owed this to us because they were running such huge surpluses in trade. So let's take a bit of that money and plow it back into development of alternative fuels. I coordinated those efforts with our own Energy Department and the Japanese Embassy, of course, working back to Tokyo. I can't think of any specific problems in this area. I guess the major surprise of my tenure was Secretary Vance's resignation over the botched hostage rescue attempt in Iran. I heard it first when a Japanese reporter I knew called, seeking my reaction. And I said "What?" And he said "Yes, I'm over here at the White House and they're handing us Xerox copies of the Secretary's resignation letter. And I said "Well, Imai-san, I know nothing about it and furthermore I have nothing to say about it." And then hung up the phone and shouted, "Does anybody know that Secretary Vance has resigned?"

Q: Were we trying to get the Japanese to assume more international responsibility? Remember, we said "You're now big boys and you ought to do more?" Or did that come within your portfolio?

MEYERS: We were beginning to push the Japanese to do more in international aid and assistance. By the time I got back to Tokyo years later we were holding formal discussions to better coordinate our aid programs.

Q: Did you have to deal much with criticism of the Japanese from American sources, from the Congress or anything?

MEYERS: No, answering occasional letters. Maybe later on, but not for the two years in Washington.

Q: Well, after two interesting years on the Japan desk you went to Yokohama. That was for language training, I gather.

MEYERS: That was for language training. Actually, I had made up my mind as I left Tokyo in 1978 to come back to the Japan desk. The only way I could drag myself onto the plane at Narita was to say "Okay, you're going to go back. You're on the Japan desk; that's great. And you're going to start working on getting back to Yokohama so you can finish the language training. Because, yes, you want to be a Japan hand." So, fortunately the assignment to Yokohama came through. I didn't want the full course back in '75. I wanted the one year so I could come to the Embassy, work, and see if I really wanted to be in Japan as much as I thought I did. And I found I did want to make it my specialty. So, yes, I got back to Yokohama and had a very good study year there. Because, first of all, the teachers just knocked themselves out, the Japanese language instructors. And the classes were small. I mean, two of you and the instructor sitting there; there was no escape. There was nowhere to run and there was nowhere to hide. So it was pretty intensive but therefore very good. And that's where we really got into the reading, as well as the speaking. Reading selected newspaper articles and listening to radio news and television until you understood what they were talking about. Embassy Tokyo also offered supplemental language courses. But Yokohama was fulltime and I achieved a 3+,3 rating. I could always talk better than I could read.

Q: Well, at the end of that you were sent to Fukuoka, where you expected to go for your first tour.

MEYERS: Yes, I was very happy to go. Because I'd worked hard on my Japanese in Yokohama and I knew if I went to Fukuoka, it would stay the same or maybe even improvsince I would use it more - and I wouldn't slip backwards, which is what I feared would happen in Tokyo.

Q: And you were in charge of the Consulate? How large was the post?

MEYERS: Well, if you counted everyonAmericans and Japanese - maybe twenty five, thirty. Not many Americanonly four. The Admin was run by a Japanese, the admin section. We had one American heading up the consular, one American heading up econ/commercial and a branch public affairs officer (BPAO) and myself. The Japanese staff totaled about twenty, twenty three or so. And a wonderful, tight knit, cooperative bunch. I mean they were just super.

Q: What were your problems you faced?

MEYERS: I guess the major issue that came up had to do with our political/military relationship. I had two U.S. military bases within my consular district. One was the Iwakuni Marine air base on the main island of Honshu and the other was the Sasebo naval base over in Nagasaki prefecture. The U.S. carrier Enterprise and its battle group were planning a port call to Sasebo. And it was the first in years because the last time the Enterprise came, we were still in Vietnam and huge anti-Vietnam demonstrations occurred in Sasebo. The sailors came ashore but they were never allowed off the base because it wasn't safe. There were actually a couple of Japanese killed in the demonstrations. So there was a lot of tension. Everyone thought all would probably be fine; Vietnam's long past. We had also developed a much more cooperative military relationship over the years. I went from the Consulate to report on the visit as did the pol/mil officer from Embassy Tokyo. All went quite well. That visit, was one highlight of my tour.

Q: And Nagasaki was in your district, as you mentioned, apparently. Any residual feeling there about Americans?

MEYERS: Little. August 9th is still remembered each year. And there were a few hardcore demonstrators, Communists and so on. One other event I recall about Kyushu as being really memorable was a visit by a Congressional delegation (CODEL) from the House Subcommittee on Ways and Means. It was led by Sam Gibbons from Florida, who was a prince of a man. Anyway, his CODEL of Republicans and Democrats, and wives and staffers, outnumbered the Consulate staff almost two to one. And at first I thought "How are we ever going to handle this?" But we did. Almost every member of the subcommittee would go to Tokyo each year for trade discussions to emphasize the importance of trade being a two way street. And each year the CODEL would also make a study tour outside Tokyo. So they came to Kyushu when I was there. We arranged a very busy schedule. They toured a Nissan plant in eastern Kyushu and a semiconductor facility operated by Texas Instruments. We traveled a fair amount through the countryside. I remember one day being on a bus driving from somewhere to somewhere. Two members were talking and looking at the rugged Kyushu hills and remarked, "Good thing we didn't have to come ashore here back in '45. This would have been rough going." All in all their visit went extremely well. They worked hard but they also had a good time.

Q: Well, at the end of your tour there, in Fukuoka, you were sent to the National War College. That is always an interesting year. Any reflections of it?

MEYERS: It was a wonderful year for me because it gave me an opportunity to learn about subjects of which I had little knowledge. I went to school with O-5, O-6 military officers as well as Foreign Service and a scattering of folks from other civilian agencies. We went to class with these officers daily and learned about military strategy and planning. And they were exposed to the way diplomats try to approach problems. So I think it was a very worthwhile year. The whole concept behind State's participation is that you are an officer bound for higher positions and will be running your own country team someday. And you should know something about where your military attachï¿½s are coming from. With luck, maybe you will even know one or two of these officers who might have been at the college at the same time.

Q: You put exactly the terms I would have put it. I think it is an excellent choice. Then, after that, you were back to Tokyo and this time as economic counselor.

MEYERS: Everything fell into place. I got the timely promotion I needed to get the job in Tokyo. I got across the Senior Threshold and so I went back as economic counselor.

Q: How large was your section there?

MEYERS: Pretty good size. Now of course, by this time- mid '80s - the commercial and economic work had been divided. So I was economic counselor. There was also a commercial counselor who represented the Commerce Department. But my section itself had about five or six officers and several Japanese staff. The economic minister headed the two sections.

Q: Did the Ambassador pay much attention to what was going on in the economic section?

MEYERS: Lots. The ambassador was Michael Mansfield. Very interested in our work because trade issues continued to define our relationship with Japan. By this time semiconductor production was a problem. And also supercomputers. The U.S. made excellent supercomputers. How come the Japanese weren't buying any for their agencies? There were services access issues - for example, U.S. law firms who wanted to practice in Japan. So, the economic, trade issues were still driving the relationship.

Q: Did you have a role in Vice President Bush's visit there in '84?

MEYERS: Well, I guess I didn't, because I don't remember it. I got there in July, just in time for Fourth of July.

Q: Well, he may have been there earlier in that year.

MEYERS: Perhaps, because I think I would have remembered. I certainly remember President Reagan coming for the Economic Summit in '86, the G-7 as it was then. So I was there for that and participated in that, writing some of the papers and so on.

Q: And we were having trade disagreements with Japan by this time, weren't we?

MEYERS: Yes, automobile exports were still a serious issue. The Japanese had come up with what they called VRAs, voluntary restraint agreements, whereby they would set a limit on how many cars they would export to the U.S. each year, trying to pacify our Congress. And they also, wisely, began to manufacture over here. I think Honda was the first, into Ohio, and then Nissan went into Tennessee, then Toyota into Kentucky. So that was going on. But automobile trade friction continued. The Japanese MITI Minister came to call on Ambassador Mansfield at one point to try to extract a "satisfactory" VRA number, but the Ambassador refused to be pinned down. The Minister and his entourage tried for about thirty minutes to get him to name a figure but he simply wouldn't do it. A little aside: I often escorted Japanese business visitors to the Ambassador's office. Ambassador Mansfield was such a down to earth person that he would invariably offer them coffee. "Would you gentlemen like to have coffee?" Oh, yes, yes, they'd like to have coffee. Well, then, he would get up and he would walk into his executive washroom and prepare his finest instant. And I would say "May I help you, Mr. Ambassador?" "No, no, Marilyn, I think I can manage, I can handle it." And his Japanese guests were dumbfounded. Here is this woman, sitting here, and here is the American Ambassador, in his shirtsleeves, serving them, and me, as well. It kind of blew their minds, and was very good for them.

Q: Were you there when Toshiba got into problems for selling illegal equipment to the Soviet Union which was going to improve the Soviet submarines, make them much more quiet? We were very upset about that here.

MEYERS: I don't think I was there for that. I left in '87 and came home the long way via the Trans-Siberian Express! I flew to Beijing and met a Foreign Service colleague who was coming back from Japan on home leave. And we took the train across China and Mongolia to Moscow. It took about a week. We got off in Irkutsk in Siberia and spent a couple of nights there. We got the next train on to Moscow and then trained up to Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, and went out to Helsinki and home from there. So that was quite a trip.

Q: And now you were put into the Economic and Business Bureau, handling GATT affairs?

MEYERS: No, it was not GATT, it was the Office of International Investment Affairs, which deals with policy regarding direct investment. So it was not trade in products. We were very much involved in the Uruguay Round of the GATT negotiations underway then. But we were negotiating for freer investment flows. Governments should institute policies that would neither entice nor restrict direct investment. Leave investment decisions to the markets, to a company's decision and don't try to entice nor exclude it thus creating, ultimately, unnatural trade flows. So that's what we were working on in Geneva through the GATT and also in the OECD in Paris. To allow free flows of direct investment as we wanted free flows of trade.

Q: Which countries were we mainly concerned about?

MEYERS: Any who were members of the GATT. It was a multilateral approach to the idea of global free trade and investment, an approach we seem to have moved away from in the last five to ten years. I don't know why we decided to abandon multilateralism. Now we're making separate bilateral agreements. One can explain NAFTA which moves toward a larger market. The EU, too, encompasses a large area originally with trade and now political unity aspirations. But otherwise there seems to be a resurgence of bilateralism.

Q: Now, important countries like China or the Soviet Union were not members of GATT. Apparently they were not heavily involved in investment matters at that time, were they?

MEYERS: No, not in private investment. We're talking about the late '80s. The Soviet Union was still the Soviet Union. And China was just beginning to become a player in international trade.

Q: Did you work on the free trade agreement with Canada?

MEYERS: No. The other investment tool we worked on in the Office of Investment Affairs was the so-called bilateral investment treaties. We focused on countries who were not members of the OECD or the GATT, particularly in Latin America but also Asia. We might be able to conclude a bilateral investment treaty freeing up investment flows and doing away with restrictions. For example, assume you want to come in and establish a company but the Malaysian government or the Paraguayan government requires that it hold 75 percent equity. That was the type of restriction we would try to negotiate down.

Q: Any problems that stick out in your mind that you would like to mention?

MEYERS: None in particular. It was an interesting two years. Negotiating on a multilateral basis was a new experience for me. On a daily basis it was not as intense as U.S.-Japan head-to-head negotiations. But thinking multilaterally was a challenge. You had to try to factor in something for everyone in making a proposal. I was the office director, we had an extremely competent and hard charging boss, Bill Milam. Most of his office directors were expected to stay three years. That was what he wanted you to do and that was my original plan. And then, after only two years, I got an offer to move back to EAP as a Deputy Assistant Secretary and I thought "He isn't going to like this." And I went to see him with a great deal of trepidation and he was just delighted for me. He was thrilled that I had this opportunity, that this was another step up, that I'd been recognized. And I just sort of sat there and relaxed and said "This is great!" He said "Yeah, this is great." He thought of me not himself. I would hope that I would do the same for my people, rejoice at their step up rather than bemoan my loss. He was just wonderful, understanding and magnanimous.

Q: Who was the assistant secretary in EAP at the time?

MEYERS: Richard Solomon. This was early Bush administration, Bush I, Bush 41; this was September '89. Well, I was called to come and fill the "woman DAS" slot. EAP had four DASes and wanted one of them to be a woman. The woman who had been there had left. The bureau looked around and said "Who else might be good, capable and female?" And my name came up, so I said "Great, I'll take it!" There was a sense that there should be female representation in the front office and I was certainly agreeable to filling that need.

Q: Which countries did you supervise?

MEYERS: The Bureau was divided amongst three "geographic" DASes and one so-called "economic DAS." I was one of the geographic DASes and was responsible for Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific island states, such as the Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji. I also oversaw relations with the TTPI, the Trust Territory of the Pacific, which had evolved into two independent states, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia although they were still under a Compact of Association with the U.S. Palau was the only remaining part of the TTPI. The Northern Marianas (Saipan) had voted to become a commonwealth of the United States, rather than independent, so technically we did not deal with them because they were not a foreign country. So there was quite an assortment of relationships.

Q: A huge amount of territory out there. Did you visit the area?

MEYERS: I flew out within a couple of months of taking the job. I was fortunate in that Secretary Baker and then-Defense Secretary Cheney went out to Australia for the annual ministerial bilaterals, called the AUSMins, the Australian/U.S. ministerials, covering defense and foreign policy. I went as part of that delegation. And then I stayed on afterwards and visited almost all the countries in my territory, an orientation tour.

Q: Did you have to go around making speeches on behalf of your countries or not?

MEYERS: You mean in Washington?

Q: Yes, or around the country.

MEYERS: No, just a couple of times. I remember one instance when Assistant Secretary Dick Solomon was supposed to make a speech in San Francisco and found that he was double-booked, something that can happen. So I went and subbed for him. I think the general theme was something about prospects for Asia. I was part of a three-person panel which included a Japanese who worked for McKenzie and Company in Japan. He was published and extremely well known. He was also a dynamic speaker, fluent in English. He spoke first but I knew I would be okay because the second speaker was a bankel don't remember his nationality. His presentation was a series of charts and graphs you couldn't possible see unless you were sitting in the front row. The audience practically fell asleep. And I thought "I'm saved; whatever I say after him, it's going to be interesting, it's going to be fascinating, I'm going to have 'em." It just worked out perfectly. You have to learn that people don't like charts, especially if they can't see them. But for the most part, no, I didn't speak much publicly.

Q: In 1991, you went to Australia as DCM. Who was the ambassador then?

MEYERS: A gentleman named Mel Sembler, who was a Presidential appointee as Ambassador to Australia and Nauru, the island state just north of Australia.

Q: Was it a large embassy?

MEYERS: Yes. Not as big as Tokyo but it was a large embassy, with several agencies represented.

Q: Yes, and you had a number of consulates, too, didn't you?

MEYERS: Yes, four. We had Perth, Melbourne, Sydney, the largest, and then Brisbane, which was still open then but has since been closed. We also had a consular agent in Adelaide.

Q: Did you get around to the consulates?

MEYERS: Yes, an orientation trip within a couple of months of getting there. After that I traveled sometimes for a specific event or to represent the ambassador. And then, when I was chargï¿½ for about seven or eight months, I got around quite a bit.

Q: What problems did you have as DCM there?

MEYERS: Basically the relationship is very sound and goes back for years. We had fought together in World War II and in Vietnam. The Aussies were also right there during the Gulf War, Operation Desert Storm. Our greatest friction was in the economic trade area. We were heavily subsidizing our agricultural exports, particularly then, to try to force the Europeans, who were subsidizing even more than we were, to come to the negotiating table. Our euphemism for this was the Export Enhancement Program (EEP). And the Australians were very unhappy about this because we were selling below their cost into their export markets. They didn't have sufficient budget to subsidize their wheat farmers. So we were knocking them out of markets where, had there been no subsidies, they could have done quite well. And they were upset about this and understandably so. The agricultural and economic counselors dealt with this problem frequently but the Aussies also raised it with the ambassador. The best we could do to assuage them was to try to tell them a bit ahead of time if a big EEP sale was about to take place. But we couldn't tell them too far ahead lest the information affect the actual grain trading on the Chicago market. I remember in particular receiving cabled instructions once to go tell the Prime Minister at such and such time in Washington - not a minute sooner - that we were about to announce a large wheat sale. It turned out to be 10:30 p.m. in Canberra! So, yes, I did go to the PM's office as instructed but I didn't see Paul Keating. I saw two of his aides who said he would not be pleased at the news. So EEP was our major headache.

Q: How were our relations with the Australian Labour government in those days?

MEYERS: They were quite good. Prime Minister Bob Hawke had brought the Australian government a lot closer to us on defense issues. As I mentioned before, Hawke had sent a couple naval ships to join us in the Gulf War and he became a very good friend of President Bush. So the big event that took place while I was there was the state visit of President George H, W. Bush, the first since Lyndon Johnson had come in 1967. The Australians were delighted that President Bush came. The government wasn't so happy with the timing, because it fell right over New Year's and fouled up everyone's holiday plans. And, of course, everyone in the Embassy also had their holiday leave cancelled and I, as the DCM, got to tell them!

Q: Did the President get into these agricultural problems or was it mainly a good will visit?

MEYERS: It was primarily a good will visit to underline the soundness of the overall relationship, despite our EEP difficulties. And the President did have the courage to mention the EEP program and to say that we would try to take Australia's sensitivities into account. But he didn't say we would back off it because, of course, we wouldn't.

Q: We didn't have any military problems then, with our bases or anything else, while you were there?

MEYERS: No. As you know we do not have any troops stationed in Australia, and our intelligence cooperation went smoothly.

Q: It sounds like an interesting tour. Any speechmaking there?

MEYERS: Yes. All DCMs get involved in public diplomacy, and sometimes I would represent the Ambassador if he couldn't go. Then, of course, I was also chargï¿½ for eight months. One of the most memorable events I attended was in a small town called Albany in Western Australia. It was around our Memorial Day. During the Second World War a lot of U.S. submarines were based there. The town holds a beautiful commemorative service each year called "Still on Patrol." Some subs, of course, never came back. They have a bell there that was taken off a sub. And everyone stands at attention as the ambassador or chargï¿½ or whoever's representing the embassy reads the list of the submarines that are "still on patrol." And then they toll the bell once for each sub. And it is so moving. Ambassador Sembler had left by May 1993 so I, as chargï¿½, went to Albany and participated in the service. I still get misty just thinking about it.

Q: Well, any final thoughts on your tour in Australia?

MEYERS: It was wonderful. Not only was I working with a country and people whom I greatly admired and have a great deal of affection for, many of whom became good friends, but I had the opportunity to work under two different ambassadors, one a political appointee, the other career. Both of them brought different strengths to their job. Political ambassadors are often trashed for general incompetence and insensitivity, but that certainly was not my experience. Mel Sembler had a genuine interest in the relationship and he certainly had a wonderful appreciation of what his professional staff could do for him. He never felt threatened by us. He put his business acumen and people skills to good use; we complimented each other nicely. Then I had a chance to be chargï¿½ and run the Embassy and that was a growing experience too.

Q: Well, then we go on to the next chapter. In 1994, you went into Burmese language training. Was that something you had asked for?

MEYERS: No. I had sought the assignment to Rangoon but the training took place happened because I had a rather long gap - about three months - between my departure from Canberra and my departure from Washington. I had had breast cancer and I had to make sure I had the medical clearance to go out to Burma. So during this time I had abbreviated Burmese language training.

Q: I see. I was going to ask you how long it lasted, but several months.

MEYERS: Not more than two or three. We covered some of the pleasantries and elementary conversation , no reading.

Q: Then you went to Rangoon as chargï¿½. When had the Ambassador left?

MEYERS: The last ambassador, Burt Levin, left in the summer of 1990. It was now '94. Due to the bloody put down of the democracy demonstrations by the junta in 1988, followed by rampant human rights abuses and their failure to allow the subsequently elected Parliament to take office, we did not assign another. The DCM served as chargï¿½ from 1990 to 1994 and that same pattern continued with me.

Q: How large was your staff there?

MEYERS: The American staff was quite small; the Burmese staff was quite large. There had been a tremendous down-sizing of our programs after the debacle of 198all our aid programs were gone. We continued to employ a number of Burmese to show support for them and also because their other employment prospects were pretty dim. The economy, as mismanaged by the generals, was pretty much in chaos. So, I'd say, American officers totaled, counting our military attachï¿½s, USIS, oh probably about 12. The Burmese, maybe 40-50. That would count all the security guards at the residence, and the other two housing compounds. And then we had our own wonderful Marine guards at the Embassy - about six of them - so eighteen Americans in all.

Q: Did we have consular agencies anywhere in Burma or was Rangoon the only post where the flag was flown?

MEYERS: Rangoon was the only post that we had. We had had a consulate in Mandalay but it had been closed a few years before. We still had the property there; a lovely old Tudor style house, combined residence and office. So we still owned the property in Mandalay but the consulate had been closed.

Q: What were your relations like with the government, I gather with the military officers who ran the country?

MEYERS: I would say distant, icy. And no access.

Q; Did they ever call you in?

MEYERS: The leaders, of course, are generals who have been running Burma since 1962. The only time I got to meet one of them, formally, on my own, General Khin Nyunt, was to present my credentials. The only other time we ever got to meet with the generalusually Khin Nyunt who was head of military intelligence - was when we had an important visitor. For example, we had three or four CODELall Senators - that came out while I was there and they met with him. Khin Nyunt was sort of the junta's, to use a Japanese term, gaijin handler - he was the one who met with outsiders of sufficient rank. He understood some English but always used an interpreter. He met with Madeleine Albright when she came to Burma. She was then Ambassador to the United Nations and had just been to China for the Women's Conference held in Beijing in the summer of '95. She very much wanted to come to Burma to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, the democracy leader who had recently been freed from house arrest. Our main window of access, of course, was the Foreign Ministry. Even there it was difficult to see anyone of upper rank. They were not available, they were too busy, they were whatever, whatever. And it wasn't simply that I was a chargï¿½ and did not have a full ambassadorial title. Most of the other Western ambassadors had the same problem. It was easier for the Chinese ambassador, for example, to see somebody in the Foreign Ministry - and the generals.

Q: Were you able yourself to meet with Suu Kyi when she was under house arrest?

MEYERS: No, when she was under house arrest she was not available to foreigners. One exception was made before I got there. About February of '94 then-Congressman Bill Richardson from New Mexico came and he was allowed to meet with her, along with a reporter from the New York Times, and one of the officers from the embassy. But that was the only time. As a rule she was not available to foreigners, nor the Burmese public, when she was under house arrest. When she was released in July '95, it was another matter. Everybody flocked to her compound except me.

Q: Oh?

MEYERS: Because, obviously, military intelligence was sitting there right by her gate, watching everybody who went in and out. The French ambassador, the West German ambassador; I think the British were between ambassadors, so it was the British chargï¿½. They, the junta, say that she's a puppet of the West, the colonial powers, and particularly the U.S. So why do I need to confirm that by charging right in? So some of my lower-ranking officers went to her house because we obviously wanted to know what was going on. I thought it best that I not be in the newspapers, on the TV news, seen sitting cheek by jowl. So I didn't go, although, of course, I was dying to be there. But I sent a note saying, "I would like to meet with you when you feel the time is okay." Word got back to me a few days later and I went, with my political officer, to meet her then.

Q: Well, she seems to be a remarkable woman. Did we carry on normal business in the sense of visas, things like this? Was there much demand for visas from Burmese?

MEYERS: Well, the answer is there wasn't much demand for visas, because the government is very tight in issuing passports and most Burmese are too poor to travel anyway. The junta would issue passports to a few businessmen to travel overseas. And we certainly did not welcome or invite any of their higher level people to the United States. And we had a general policy that no high level Administration people should go out there either. So I pretty much became the funnel through which any contact went.

Q: What about such things as Leader Grants, and Fulbrights?

MEYERS: This is one of the areas where you would just sit back and say "Oh, if only..." Because you could see there were so many areas where such grants or exchange programs would be of tremendous benefit to the Burmese. Sending professors to teach in Rangoon University, for example, whose medical school, years ago, was cross accredited with the University of London. Or sending a Burmese agronomist to the U.S. to study how to increase crop yields. What we would find when we tried to do leader grants was that the government would issue a passport to one of their own lackeysome eminently unqualified person. Their choice and not ours. And this was not acceptable to us. So that was the real tragedy, because you could just see what was lacking and how many of our programs could help and it just wasn't possible.

Q: What about commerce? Did we import much textiles or other things?

MEYERS: Very little trade. There were some U.S. companies that were manufacturing garments in Burma. I think those operations, due to human rights and shareholder pressure, have pretty much shut down. Some U.S. oil companies were doing exploration for natural gas offshore; they've pretty much left. So anything that was going on in terms of investment was pretty much gone. And very little trade, which was one reason why human rights is a major issue in the relationship with Burma.

Q: Was there any opportunity for you to do any speaking?

MEYERS: My little farewell address at the dinner that the Vice Foreign Minister gave for me two nights before I left. I'm trying to think of a single instance where I was invited to come and speak publicly and I think the answer is no. We traveled as much as we could to find out what is going on in other parts of the country, especially because we couldn't get any information out of anybody in Rangoon. Of course, diplomats were required to obtain advance permission to travel more than 25 miles out of Rangoon. You had to file a note with the Foreign Ministry to request permission and, of course, they forwarded it to military intelligence, MI, who gave thumbs up or down. And usually, if you're trying to leave on a flight on Thursday, by Wednesday at 5:00 p.m., you hadn't had an answer. So you went to the airport Thursday morning and hoped it all worked out. And usually it did but it was always this sort of last minute thing. So I did travel around the country quite a bit but no public speechmaking. The generals did not want the people to think the U.S. had any presence or interest in Burma. But, informally, people were usually glad to see us.

Q: That's what I wanted to ask you. Were the people themselves, the man on the street, were they friendly?

MEYERS: Oh, yes, very, and very appreciative of any foreigners who did come to Burma. They were glad to see foreign visitors. Some of the Burmese had set up quite successful small travel agencies to work out domestic travel for foreign visitors. A foreigner coming in for travel, having obtained a visa, could go right up to Mandalay whereas we diplomats had to get permission to go there. The Burmese themselves were very receptive to foreign guests though they had to maintain a distance as the junta was watching them closely.

I remember one of the rare groups that came which I was delighted to host at the residence. The American Museum of Natural History in New York was observing its 125th anniversary and had organized a trip for its patrons to fly around the world in a chartered aircraft to several countrie"back of beyond" sort of countriewhere, at some time in that 125 years, the museum had carried out some sort of project. The itinerary included places like Madagascar and Papua New Guinea, and Burma and I hosted a reception for them. I invited Burmese guests too. We found that private sector people such as business people and a few Burmese lawyers would come. Invitees from the ministries - in this case the one dealing with cultural affairs - and the Foreign Ministry would not come. Military Intelligence always came because they wanted to keep watch on everybody else. So we could count on their being there. And then my embassy staff, my American officers, political and econ and so on. And it was an exciting evening because the American guests were all movers and shakers and were very interested in what was going on politically and economically. One of the travelers was the publisher of Washingtonian Magazine and when he got back he wrote a fantastic op-ed piece for the Washington Post recognizing the hard work that diplomats do in these off-the-beaten track countries. And he cited a couple of other people, and me, by name and how hard we were working for democracy. "After all the CNN cameras have picked up and gone home," he wrote, "these diplomats will still be pursuing their task." And of course telephone service in and out of Burma was nonexistent. Not nonexistent, but dysfunctional because the system they have is basically the one left by the British when they pulled out in '48. And one morning out of the blue, I got a call at home from a friend in Washington. And she said "I'm calling because there's this op-ed piece in The Washington Post this morning and you're mentioned." And I said "Oh, God, what did I do?" As a diplomat, your first reaction is "No, not in the papers, by name! What did I do?" She said "No, no, no, this is wonderful!" So then she read it to me and mailed me several copies which I still have here someplace.

So it's a fascinating journey back in time to go to Burma. Thailand has boomed economically and so has Singapore and now Vietnam in the last ten years. And here, left in the dust, is this country that was a fractious democracy on the road to development in the Fifties. Then the military took over in '62 and it has been run by the military ever since. The generals tried the Burmese road to socialism, which was an absolute failure. The currency is worth absolute zilch. It's just shocking the way people live. I think they're poorer now. I left in October '96. I had a chance to go back a couple of years ago in February 2003. I went to Vietnam with an organized tour and thought "As long as I'm this close." And fortunately one of my Australian friends was the Australian ambassador in Rangoon at the time. So I went and stayed with Trevor and Christine, his wife, and spent a week there. The country's gone backwards. The only thing that's changed is more cars and trucks crowding the roads in Rangoon. Once you get out in the countryside, you still see the oxcarts and broken down buses.

Q: Do we have an airline connection to Rangoon?

MEYERS: Do we have a U.S. carrier? No. You can fly a U.S. carrier to Bangkok. Then it's about an hour's flight on Thai Airways or Burma Air, north to Rangoon. But I noticed that air service in and out of Rangoon had been severely cut back since 1996 when I was there. There were far fewer flights both in and out than before.

Q: What do you foresee for the country? How long can the military group hang on?

MEYERS: Unfortunately my crystal ball is dark. I see little glimmer of hope in the short term. How long can these guys hang on? The first generation hung in there from '62 until the late 80's. Until '87, '88 when Ne Win formally stepped down after his disastrous Burmese road to socialism policies left the economy in ruins. And then the next group replaced him. And now Khin Nyunt, head of military intelligence, the one designated to meet with foreigners, has been removed by the junta. Too forward leaning, too inclined, perhaps, to try to have some sort of dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi. So he is under house arrest now and has been replaced by a hardliner who roughed up her and her entourage in May, 2003. Some of her people were killed and she was injured. And now she's again under house arrest and really isolated, all her political supporters having been kicked off her compound. She's stuck there all by herself. I hope she has her cook, at least, so she can get some meals, she's so slim, too slim. Changing the system there is not really important enough to any outsider and the Burmese people themselves have been ground into the dust. The Chinese have certainly moved into there in a big way commercially.

Q: They have no interest in changing the government, presumably.

MEYERS: No. So long as they can get what they wantrade, construction contracts, increasing influence. I think the Japanese have been eager to go back in with aid projects. But they've held the line and not done it. I think it's very, very tough. I don't know, frankly, how much longer Aung San Suu Kyi can hang on.

Q: Do the Indians play a role there?

MEYERS: I'd say, politically, not really, and economically, yes. They held quite an impressive trade show while I was there, and that was seven years ago. So they were developing commerce and trade. I think the generals are happier to deal with them than any of the Western powers. But it would be the Chinese who would be number one.

What was interesting overall was the different approach we and the Europeans took to demonstrate our disapproval of the regime. The U.S. pulled out its ambassador and left a DCM to function as chargï¿½. The Europeans - Germany, France, the UK, the Italians - kept their ambassadors but withdrew their military attachï¿½s. We kept our military attachï¿½s. I, for one, thought that was a good way to handle it. We registered our disapproval but we kept our two men in military uniform to liaise with this military government, at least at a lower level. I don't want to push this too far but military have common experience and language and I always felt we had better contacts at the lover level because of our attachï¿½s. And I really don't think the European heads of mission had any better access higher up simply because of their ambassadorial titles.

Q: Marilyn, you don't paint a very optimistic picture of conditions in Burma and the future. But I gather that's the way it is.

MEYERS: I think that's the way it is, not much hope in the near future. Actually, I have a video given me by one of the officers who was serving in our Embassy during the democracy demonstrations in 1988. You see these hordes of Burmese parading in the street in front of the Embassy and, when I first heard the audio, I couldn't figure out what they were saying. You're hearing this "democracy, democracy, democracy." They were chanting "democracy," with the emphasis on the first syllable. That was a time of hope and the government squashed it brutally. About three thousand people were killed by the military. Young students made it to the steps of Rangoon Hospital and, as the doctors and nurses came out to help them, the soldiers began shooting the doctors and nurses. Just awful! Now, this was 15 years ag1988 - but there's been harsh repression ever since. And even though the National League for Democracy won the election in 1990 by a landslide, by 85 per cent, the generals have never ceded power. So, I'm sorry, Tom, I would love to be able to say, a week from Tuesday or two months from now things will change but I just don't see it.

Q: Any other comments on your time there in Burma?

MEYERS: Simply that I'm so gratified I had the chance to serve there. I went basically because I wanted to run my own embassy and knew that the DCM was chargï¿½. But the experience of seeing that multi-faceted country, and of listening to Suu Kyi the year she was free and would make speeches of hope and encouragement to the throngs who gathered at her gate each weekenthese things will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Q: After that tour, you came back in '96 and retired. Are there any final thoughts you have about a career in the Foreign Service? Would you recommend it to young people these days, men and women?

MEYERS: Well, for me it was the perfect career. Looking back, I have no regrets over other roads not taken. As for others ... I think the Department has changed somewhat and no longer has the commitment to a lifetime, professional corps. On the plus side, women now have a level playing field in getting ahead. And, of course, a lot more fields have opened to professional women too - law, banking, medicine. But, if you're interested in international affairs and in spending time actually living abroad, as well as here in Washington, the Foreign Service still warrants serious consideration. Just keep in mind that you might end up living overseas - but not necessarily where you wanted to go!

Q: Well, thank you very much. This is Thomas Dunnigan speaking on January 17, 2005. I've been talking with Marilyn Meyers about her career in the Foreign Service on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. Thank you very much, Marilyn.

MEYERS: I enjoyed it, thank you!

End of interview